

SCOTOBIOLOGY: THE BIOLOGY OF THE DARK

An outline for public information prepared by Dr. R.G.S. Bidwell, Wallace, NS

What is Scotobiology?

The concept of scotobiology as a science was developed at a conference on light pollution held in Muskoka, Ontario, in 2003. It was recognized that the underlying principle was the deleterious effect of light pollution on the operation of biological systems, ranging from their biochemistry and physiology to their social behaviour. Scotobiology is the study of biological systems that require nightly darkness for their effective performance; systems that are inhibited or prevented from operating by light.

Why is Scotobiology important?

Virtually all biological systems evolved in an environment of alternating light and darkness. Furthermore, the light/dark periods in temperate zones vary with the seasons. Organisms have evolved to use the variations in the length of day and night to integrate their physiological and social behaviour with the seasons. Many organisms measure specifically the length of the night, and light pollution may prevent them from determining the season, with serious or deadly consequences. For this reason light pollution is recognized as being a major component of global pollution, and scotobiology, the study of its specific effects on organisms, has now become an important branch of biological research.

Summary of specific scotobiological responses

Insects: Insects tend to fly towards light. Light pollution thus causes insects to concentrate around bright lights at night with several serious consequences. First, they become easy prey for birds and predacious insects. Insect numbers are reduced by their disorientation and death around lights, and also because they are concentrated where natural predators have an unnatural advantage to capture them. This reduction in insect populations has been found to affect the populations of animals not strongly attracted to light, including frogs, salamanders, bats, some birds and small mammals. In addition, the mating and breeding habits of some insects require darkness, so that light pollution can interfere or prohibit normal reproduction. Finally, the migration habits and paths of many insects are affected by light pollution with resulting population depletion. The huge piles of dead insects such as mayflies that are found under streetlights in springtime give some idea of the extent of damage such lights can cause.

Birds: Many birds are powerfully attracted to lights, and over a hundred million birds die from collisions with illuminated structures in North America alone every year. The actual loss of bird populations is hard to calculate, but it is significantly large. Furthermore, as with insects, bird migration patterns may be affected by light pollution because the birds may become disoriented and unable to follow their normal flight paths. Finally, the concentration of birds around lights also encourages animals and birds of prey that feed on smaller birds, resulting in still further reductions in the population numbers of migrating birds.

Animals: The behaviour of many animals is seriously affected by light pollution. Mating, hunting and feeding habits of wolves and other large animals are altered, with resulting decreases in population. Salamanders, frogs and other amphibians, many of which are already under serious threat from chemical pollution, are subject to impacts from even low levels of artificial night lighting on their physiology, ecology, behaviour and evolution. It is very likely the behaviour of many if not most of our wild animals is similarly and negatively affected by even low levels of light pollution.

Plants: Plants are seriously affected by light pollution. Probably the most important aspects of a plant's reaction to and interpretation of darkness are expressed in its developmental behaviour: flowering, dormancy and the onset of senescence. The plant's ability to measure and respond to day length is crucial in enabling it to dovetail its developmental behaviour with the seasons. We are all aware of "long-day" and "short-day" plants. What is not so widely known is that plants do not measure or react to the length of the day. Instead, they measure and respond to night length, i.e. the duration of darkness. So short-day plants really require long nights, and should properly be called long-night plants. The problem for short-day/long-night plants arises from the fact that if they are illuminated briefly during a long night, they interpret the event as if they had experienced two short nights, rather than one long night with an interruption. As a result their flowering and developmental patterns may be seriously compromised. Short-day plants normally bloom in the fall, as the days shorten, and they respond to the lengthening nights to initiate the onset of flowering; and then, as the nights further lengthen, the onset of dormancy, which enables them to withstand the rigours of winter. Thus, if the nights are interrupted by light pollution, the consequences can be severe or deadly. Furthermore, the effect of successive experiences of nightly illumination is cumulative. It follows that light pollution, particularly if it is repetitive on a nightly basis, can seriously affect the development, flowering and dormancy – and so the very existence – of short-day (long-night) plants.

Human Health: Humans, like other animals, are affected by nightly light pollution, and human health is more severely affected by light pollution than is generally realized. Human hormone regulation, physiology and behaviour evolved in a diurnal pattern of day and night. The normal operation of wake/sleep cycles, hormone cycles, the immune system and other biochemical behaviour, depends on the daily alternation of light and dark, and may be severely damaged by night-time illumination. It has been shown that the immune system works more strongly during the day to protect the body against microbial invasion, and antibody production is highest in daytime. During the night, killer cells that attack tumours and existing invasions are more active. Light pollution may thus compromise the operation of human hormone and immune systems leading to increased incidence of cancer and other diseases, as well as to other physical as well as psychological disorders including mental illness, psychiatric instability, and such problems as seasonal depression (SAD). This means that even turning on a night-light or bedside lamp may have negative effects on a person's health. This may have little relevance to light pollution in parks, but it is important to note that bright lights in camp-sites may be unhealthy to humans as well as to the wildlife inhabitants of the park.

Sociology: Human sociology is affected by light pollution. It is now commonplace to be concerned by the fact that few people alive today have had the opportunity to experience the glory of the night sky. This is sad for citizens of “advanced” or wealthy countries, but it is a serious loss of the cultural heritage of aboriginal peoples and those who live (or lived) under natural and unpolluted conditions. The darkness of the night and the ability to commune with the natural beauty of the moon and stars and the glories of the aurora are necessary for the well-being and sociological wholeness of native peoples all over the world. Most of those who live in places like Canada and the United States of America can no longer experience the wholeness of dark skies. Parks that emphasize dark skies are thus an essential part of our human and environmental heritage.

Astronomy: It hardly needs to be mentioned that astronomy depends on dark skies and the virtual absence of light pollution. Both the importance and cost of astronomical research to our present society are very high, and are as important as environmental concerns for the control of light pollution.

Prospects of abatement of light pollution: the importance of public opinion

Public pressure is the surest way to reduce light pollution. This will assist generating more funds for basic research in scotobiology, and for helping to develop legislation to control light pollution if that is found to be necessary. Light pollution can be controlled by reducing unnecessary lighting, focussing required lighting where needed rather than shining it in every direction, and the use of directional light shades where appropriate. Lower levels of illumination are often advantageous, and have been found to provide better safety and protection for pedestrians than the normally used bright streetlights. All these approaches are already being developed and put to use, but the continued application of public pressure is essential to reduce not only the actual light pollution and the cost in dollars for unnecessary lights, but also to reduce the environmental pollution that results from making the electricity to run them. Anything that can be done to stimulate public appreciation of the dangers and costs of light pollution will be well worth the effort.

If there are further questions about scotobiology, please call:
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